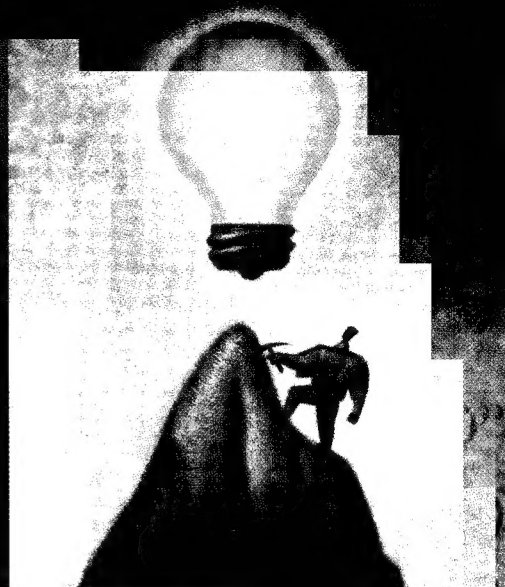


Time For A Little Innovation Oxygen



BY JIM CARROLL

Is your sales team getting a tad stale? Try rejuvenating staff by prescribing a dose of newfound creativity.

It is no secret that we are in an economy that has become far more hurried, complex and uncertain. Things are changing at a furious pace out there – from the products we represent, to the markets we are selling to, to the attitudes of the customers that we are dealing with.

In such an environment, a constant, relentless focus on innovative sales methods and approaches might be the key to helping deal with your customers' changing needs. And through innovation, you may discover new opportunities.

This is the perfect time for every sales organization to put in place what I call "innovation oxygen." This involves establishing a culture where all salespeople are actively encouraged to test a new idea.

Banish complacency

Start out by banishing forever one of the worst phrases ever to be used in the corporate setting: "We've always done it that way."

Let go of the past. Things are different today, and will be far more different tomorrow. Constant, relentless change with markets, products, technology, customer behaviors and attitudes is the new reality. Trying to go forward by doing what you've done in the past, results in being blinded of

potential opportunity. Don't let complacency drive your sales agenda.

Put an alternative culture in place – one that encourages the use of the phrase, "Why not try doing it this way?" If you followed a certain sales methodology in the past and it isn't working as well as it used to, then do something completely different. See if it works. If it doesn't work, look at your attempt as a learning experience and move on to something new again. Try ten different approaches, and maybe you'll find one that is effective. Throw out the other nine, and give yourself marks for innovation.

Take risks, reward failure

Of course, you can't do this if your corporate mindset is one that discourages risk-taking. I'd suggest that to get into innovation mode, you should put yourself back in the mindset of the late 1990's. Back then, it seemed that almost anything was possible, and everyone was willing to go out on a limb to try something new.

That's no longer the case today. The dot.com implosion and ethics scandals challenged the economy and changed investment environments; this has all had an impact on our willingness to try new ways of doing business. Indeed, it's fair to say that the

climate towards risk taking and innovation has become very negative. After all, who would dare to stick out their neck today when it seems that those who previously took risks (the individuals who explored new business models, adopted new sales technologies, or established innovative methods of dealing with markets and customers), failed? Spectacularly so.

The world of today is one which innovators must hang their head in shame in, and the nervous nellys who dared not innovate in the past now reign supreme! Talk about a mindset that encourages a sales force to cling to all the old ways of doing business!

My advice? Bring back the courage to innovate. Otherwise, current attitudes will settle in like a wet sponge, smothering any chance for innovation. Explore new ways of dealing with the customer. Continue to examine methods of building sustainable customer relationships and loyalty. Return to experimenting with leading edge technology that might help to encourage repeat sales or discover new opportunities.

Whatever the case may be, keep trying out new approaches to do business, and reward those staff members who are willing to experiment and try new ideas.

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Deal with the reality of aggressive indecision

Anyone involved in sales has come to realize that over the last several years, it has become more and more difficult to close a deal. Massive indecision has come to be the rule, not the exception. And you can expect that to be a long-term reality, so adjust your plans accordingly.

The fact is, people have decided not to make decisions – and they like it! This has taught them something – they can hold off on deciding until the very last minute. The impact is rather challenging. For salespeople, what this means is a business cycle that increasingly relies on long sales lead times, with sudden and instant short-term decision horizons.

You will find that your prospects will keep putting you off, and then one day will call, breathless and in a rush! There’s a decision to be made tomorrow morning, you are told. They need a revised proposal by 9am, and they need you to attend the meeting. Oh, and you’ve got to be able to address multiple different product scenarios that haven’t been talked about before.

Can you respond to such a situation? Do you have a culture that would let you instantly jump in and reconfigure a deal? Can you pull together the information that would be necessary to support your presentation? In retrospect, the need to be in an innovative frame of mind becomes obvious – critical, in fact. This new world can present a big shift in the approach that needs to be taken by your sales force.

Salespeople need to constantly probe and learn how to deal with the customer who lets aggressive indecision rule their decision making process.

Encourage frivolous education and promote offbeat time

To get into a frame of mind of acting fast, everyone needs to be able to learn a lot, very quickly. One way of doing that is by encouraging people to “waste” time. That’s right – I really recommend that as a business strategy.

How can a sales force truly understand their customers if they are restricted to formal education programs? How can they learn about the new products that they need to sell when those products are coming to market so

quickly? How can they learn new methods of dealing with the customer by taking an in-house course that was developed over a year ago, when the market was completely different from today?

That’s where frivolous education comes in as a complement to traditional, formal corporate education programs. Why not establish some “playtime” with your sales force, with the purpose being to try out a multitude of new technologies: encourage browsing through industry magazines, surfing the Web for market research, etc... Such activities may help bring understanding to how the customer is changing. So in fact, what may appear to be “wasting time,” really is not so.

Set your sales force out to do frivolous activities with a goal in mind – to measure customer service, examine competitive activities, take a look at new products, or simply come up with some innovative, new ideas that might help them sell more. Maybe you’ll get some unique insight that doesn’t come from traditional educational programs.

Last but not least – destroy organizational sclerosis

It’s been said before, but needs to be said again – hierarchy is the enemy of innovation. Everyone knows that the biggest challenge in many organizations are uncommunicative departments, and a culture that doesn’t promote openness. To improve the ability of an organization to innovate, communication barriers need to be broken down.

It seemed that when new technologies appeared on the scene in the 1990’s, that there were vast new opportunities to destroy “organizational sclerosis.” And yet now, this culture of open communication is slowly being destroyed, as companies come to discourage frivolous employee communications. Jokes are frowned upon, and political correctness has become stifling. This indictment of open communication impairs the very ability of the organization to encourage a culture of knowledge exchange, often critical for understanding how markets and customers are changing.

We need to continue to encourage employees to communicate as much as possible, however frivolous. Do this, and you’ll find that the culture of innovation opens up too. **C**